

Both Ends of the Leash

Training Outside the Box: Can you bet against your dog's nature and win?

Patricia B. McConnell

How strong are a breed's behavioral predispositions, anyway? Can you teach a Spaniel to come on command even as a grouse huddles in a thicket directly in front of her? What are the chances of training a sheep-guarding Komodor to host a "welcome to the neighborhood" party for a bunch of unfamiliar dogs? In other words, how often, and how well, can training (or nurture) override genetics (or nature)? The answer? No one knows. At least, not until they try.

Of course, we can all make some pretty good guesses. Can you teach your Yorkie to back a bull into a truck? Probably not. Would your adolescent Border Collie be the perfect pet for an elderly disabled couple who live in the city? Okay. I take it back. We do know, sometimes.

But not all the time. Knowing a dog's breed may allow us to make predictions about individual behavior, but I've met plenty of Labradors who wouldn't fetch, and plenty of Greyhounds who wouldn't run. Of course, in a generic sense, we do know enough about dog breeds to do a reasonably good job predicting an individual's size, shape and behavioral tendencies. That is, after all, what breeds are all about – breeds are merely subsets of all possible genetic combinations in the group of animals that we call dogs. Those possible genetic combinations do have boundaries, however, the broadest of which are established by the species we call *Canis lupus familiaris*. We don't expect dogs to fly, live underwater or turn into butterflies because we all know that dogs are four-legged mammals who come looking and acting pretty much like Benji or Rin Tin Tin.

We also know that Spaniels tend to be especially interested in birds and small game, that Terriers love



to dig and that Retrievers..., well, you know. So the answer to the question on training overriding intrinsic behavior is both gloriously simple and intriguingly complicated. On the one hand, knowing an animal's genetic background allows us to establish probability, something like a weather prediction. "Seventy percent chance of rain showers today" doesn't tell you it's going to rain. It just says it's more likely to than not. Whether you take the prediction to heart and carry an umbrella to work depends on many factors: Has it rained every day for the last week? How much do you trust the prediction? And probably most importantly, what is the consequence if it does rain and you're unprepared? Are you going home right after work to walk the dogs, who couldn't care less what you look like? Or are you giving a keynote speech at a televised conference?

It's a similar process with the behavior of our dogs. Can your German Shorthaired Pointer be taught to come reliably every time you call while the two of you are walking in the woods? Well, it depends. His breed allows us to make our first prediction – GSPs were bred to work with a lot more independence than Retrievers or Border Collies, and it's no surprise to anyone that, in general, they are harder to train to come when called than a dog who was bred to work at your side.

However, even within a breed, individual dogs are not clones. Most GSPs quiver at the thought of chasing after a bevy of quail, but there are always a few who haven't read the breed description. That's true of individuals in every breed. Not all Greyhounds are passionate about running after a rabbit, and not all Border Collies obsessively herd the

house cat. There is a tremendous amount of individual variation within a breed, and each individual's genetic inheritance creates behavioral predispositions that are stronger in some cases, weaker in others.

So far, we have two factors that allow us to make predictions about a dog's behavior – the first is his breed (or mix of breeds as best we can tell) as an indicator of a genetic predisposition to behave one way or another, and the second is his specific personality. Both play huge roles in every dog's behavior and can tell us a lot about whether training can override an inherited tendency to find birds, herd livestock or dig up the back yard.

But a third factor must be considered when asking if a dog can be reliably trained to do any one particular thing. That factor is you. How much time do you have to devote to the exercise in question? How important is it to you? How good a trainer are you? The answer to these questions have to be balanced against who your dog is, what he wants to do and how much he wants to do it. Answering the questions honestly and objectively will go a long way to either getting the job done or avoiding frustration and failure.

Speaking of failure, there's one more essential factor that absolutely has to be added into the mix. What happens if things don't go according to plan? What if, in spite of extensive and expert training, your Italian Greyhound forgets herself and takes off after a rabbit?

Compare the consequences of that happening if you're in a small, fenced dog park as opposed to what might happen if you're walking next to a six-lane highway with cars going 75 miles an hour. Imagine that the odds your dog won't listen are the same in each case – say, 5 percent. It's the same dog, with the same personality and the same amount of training, just different scenarios. The choice most of us would make, at least while walking beside a highway, is obvious, and it is solely and uniquely tied to the consequences of losing the bet.

I can tell you this: My Great Pyrenees, Tulip, was never off-leash when we went walking anywhere off the farm. Would it have been possible to teach her to reliably come when called even if a deer jumped up in front of us and dashed into the brush? You

guessed it – I don't know. What I do know is that the probability of success was so low that it wasn't worth the risk, the time and the effort for me to find out. I knew the odds, which, because of her genetics, were heavily stacked against me. I had enough of a challenge keeping her from dashing across the road when going from the farmhouse to the barn.

On the other hand, I walk my Border Collies off-leash in huge expanses of open land, because in this case, genetics and training are on my side. I worked hard to teach them to come when called, I watch them carefully and I don't let them get too far away from me. When they're adolescents, I even teach them that they'd better keep their eyes on me or I'll disappear myself. And, hey, let's be honest: They're Border Collies, a breed that is famous for being so easy to train.

However, it's also true that the Border Collies I've had have varied tremendously in how easy they were to teach a 100 percent reliable recall. It took me over a year to teach Pippy Tay to come when called, first time, every time, even if a deer bolted from the brush in front of us. I don't believe I ever had to train Lassie to come at all – the reason, in actuality, that I named her Lassie in the first place. Tulip, bless her fluffy white soul, was a sheep-guarding dog, bred for centuries to work independently of people and to take charge of the situation on her own without waiting for human back-up. She was also, well, Tulip, and very different from Bo Peep, my first Great Pyrenees, who was as content to stay with me or the sheep as Tulip was inspired to go cross-country.

As I write, I'm thinking that I should modify the answer at the beginning of this column. The next time I'm asked whether or not training can override a dog's behavioral inheritance, I should say “I don't know – it depends.” That in itself might not sound very helpful, but if you know what it depends upon – your dog's genetics, his personality, your level of training and commitment, and the consequence of failure – you'll have an answer that will serve you well.

Patricia B. McConnell, PhD, is an animal behaviorist and ethologist and an adjunct professor in Zoology at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, as well as the author of numerous books on behavior and training.

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